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Kuna Na Interview

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Interviewer: Edward Kim

Artist: Kuna Na

In-Person Interview: MN Gallery, Chicago, IL

Date: April 17, 2012, 8:40 p.m.

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 203: Art and Artists in Contemporary Culture during the 2012 Spring Quarter as part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design.

Artist Bio:

“I like to self-identify as an artist first, and then a woman, and then as a teacher, and then as an Asian/ Korean. But as an artist, it has to be universal. It’s a large picture. I’d like to be part of the large picture rather than just an Asian American.”

Kuna Na is a Korean-born artist who teaches a diverse group of pre-kindergarten students in Chicago. She and her husband, Jim, reside in the Bridgeport neighborhood of Chicago, Illinois. They opened an art gallery together in their community and named it mn Gallery after the first initials of their last names: Molnar and Na. Since 2000 they have been successful in showcasing artists in the community and beyond. They have since more or less closed their gallery but plan to reopen it again in the future.



Photograph courtesy of Kuna Na, 2012.

- Artist bio written by Edward Kim in conversation with Kuna Na.

Interview Transcript:

Kuna Na: I was born and raised in Korea. I left Korea when I was 21 years old. I left for Germany and that's where my son was born. After three years of living in Germany, I came to the United States, and I majored in painting at the University of Texas in El Paso, and then went to graduate school in Notre Dame in South Indiana concentrating on painting. Then I moved to Chicago and had various jobs.

Edward Kim: What kinds of jobs did you do?

K: Textile jobs. I painted and designed neckties there. I worked at a textile design company for 2 or 3 years, and then I got a teaching job at the University of Maryland at College Park. I taught design and painting there for a couple of years, then I came back to Chicago and worked again at the textile design company for a while. I thought I should maybe get a more secure job so I could pursue art without feeling financially strapped. So I enrolled at Northeastern University to get [an] Early Childhood certification, which took me two whole years to become a grade school teacher.

E: What year was that?

K: 1999. So this is [my] thirteenth year teaching early childhood.

E: I know you talked to me earlier about your experience teaching kindergarten. You've mentioned that children are the best at art. Could you elaborate more on that?

K: I was going to get [a] teaching certification as an art teacher because that would only take one year.... I thought that it would be so wonderful to teach children because, as Picasso said, it took him fifty years to paint like a child. I understood what he was talking about. And every time I looked at children's artwork, I was envious. They have no fear of making mistakes. They accept everything they do and they jump right in. They have no preconceived ideas and tell story after story with just a simple few strokes. And I love it. And so that's why I really wanted to work with young children. Period. And when I taught at the university, I had such a horrible experience.

E: Really? Could you share you an experience?

K: I didn't have a great experience teaching college. It was so theory-oriented, a lot of rationalizing things. Also, we were making connections with art history, and looking at famous artists and mainstream galleries, and museums and aspiring to mimic that success. And I did not want to teach that to students. That's a very competitive approach, and these students were not serious. Usually they were not even art majors, so they were just taking [the courses] as electives. And they were just trying to spend the least amount of time possible at it and still demanding A's.

I found it very difficult. So, I did not have a good time. If I'd been teaching at an art school, it might have been different, but a state school like that--and also, yeah, it was too much theory.

E: I see. OK. Could we transition now into talking about your identity as an Asian American? Well, first of all, do you identify as an Asian American--do you like that label at all?

K: No, I don't.

E: O.K.

K: I don't. I usually don't label [sic] others like that. . . .

E: Do you address Asian or Asian-identity themes in your art work? If so, could you give a specific example?

K: I have to say that I originally did not know, but I found out, that a lot of people, even hundreds of years ago, even here in America--use an improvisational way of making art. It's a very strong style, and also it's very known, and it's also a benchmark for other paintings and all that. . . .

[We diverged into a discussion of the traditional, improvisational musical style called Shinhwa here.]

...I start with very random gestures. No preconceived [thoughts or plans] whatsoever. I just [start] with a drop of paint or a stroke of line. Or maybe something like a dot. And I begin with that very gestural markmaking and then I slowly develop form, color; turn it upside down. I develop it; I use my fingers, and put it on the floor and walk on the canvas, and develop it further and just build up, and also eliminate, some parts that are not necessary. It is all very in-the-moment.

E: So, does it take you a while to complete one particular artwork?

K: Sometime it takes me a long time, but not necessarily. Sometimes it takes me a month. . . I'm still working on a painting [that has been ongoing] for years! . . .

E: What's your favorite medium? Is it oil?

K: It is definitely oil.

E: Why?

K: Because oil is very slow in drying. It forces me to look at it longer. Acrylic is water-based, and you have to act very fast. I don't know, now, they have a medium for acrylic to make it slower-drying, but oil has a consistency that is compatible with different mediums. But I, now, I feel that physically it's not very safe, because of the fumes. I mix it with a lot of turpentine. In the evenings when I'm painting, it is very difficult for me to go to sleep because of the fumes in my blood.

E: How do you do art with your oils right now? Do you use gloves? Do you...?

K: I always use gloves. But I do use my fingers directly sometimes. But I haven't painted for a while.

E: I see. When was the last time, if you don't mind me asking?

K: Let's see... two years. So, I feel healthy.

E: Oh, interesting.

[We paused here to discuss painting product brands and recommendations for students.]

E: On the 2012 Version Festival website, it says that mn would be involved.. Can you tell me more about what this festival is about and what your plans are for the mn show?

K: You know, first off, I will e-mail the links to you, so you can see the different artists that are presenting. They are very good. . . very cutting-edge and experimental. . . . My gallery is going to do an art salon, that is a discussion session. A few people will sit down, and we are going to show some artwork, and we will discuss. That's what they decided to do. It's not 100% clear yet. They are trying to come up with things. But I think for us and for them it is the best thing they can do at my space.

E: So, what other.. I know you are busy with teaching now. I know you are teaching early childhood education/kindergarten and probably have to grade papers and what not... I mean I don't know if you have to grade papers...

K: I have a lot of paperwork. Because it is a federally funded program. So it is very, very,... I'm like a social worker. So, yes, I have to do a lot of paperwork.

E: I see. So, you mentioned that it's been a while that you've done oil painting. So, do you have the time to do any art? Or is there any art projects--I know you are work on displaying art at your gallery and currently involved in the Version Festival. Is there anything you would like to work on or anything else that you are currently working on in terms of art?

K: It is tough.

E: Oh, O.K.

K: It is tough. It is a struggle to work at a full-time teaching job and making art and also running the gallery. It is tough, but as a teacher, it is kind of, compared to other jobs, it is doable because we have a summer break.

E: I see. O.K.

K: And, also, I can take care of all my work obligations, and be home by 4:00. Then I can do my art. Recently I've been interested in textiles.

E: Oh, interesting!

K: So, I'm taking a sewing class. I have been taking sewing classes, but now I'm learning more about materials and fabrics and how to construct things. I would like to engage textiles with my paintings--to paint on the patterns of textiles, or stitch textiles onto my paintings.

E: Would you mind showing me one of your paintings and talking about them? The textile ones or any one that you would like to perhaps discuss?

[Kuna shows me several of her artworks. We discuss the subject matter she has addressed throughout her artistic career. Some of the subjects include neckties, elements in nature (wood, fire, water, and metal), and seashells. Aside from oil, she has used charcoal and acrylics and experimented with various materials. She also discusses her series called "Flower Power," which deals with themes of the womb & womanhood, and the psychology behind these subjects. I also asked her about the business of running an art show. She explained the importance of the space provided by the venue and how that determines what art work she decides to show.]

E: Could you tell me more about when you became interested in art?

K: My uncle was a very famous artist in Korea, and I trained under him--Oriental brush painting, for a while. And my father was also very supportive. I took classes; I was good at it. I was well-recognized at my school, and everybody thought that I was good at art. So, there was no doubt that I would be an artist--a teacher. I thought that it was already a given. But when I was in the University of Texas, I met a beautiful person--my painting professor. I showed him everything that I did in Korea (and I was very proud of what I did). And then he said basically, "Kuna, I would like to suggest to you that the most important thing you should do is to forget everything that you have learned about art in Korea. I want you to undo everything." Because in Korea I learned how to draw representationally. It is very formalized. Likeness is very important. And

how to mix colors is very important. Composition is very formal. It was a very formal training I had. And my professor in Texas said, "Forget about that. You need to just forget about formal art-making."

E: So, did you listen to him?

K: No, I said [we laugh], no, I said, "What you guys are doing here is not art. Children can do this!" You know, how many students in that class could draw like I could. And I made fun of them. And I was, for one, I was very angry. I really became confrontational. Every crit[ique] we had, was like, I was so angry.

E: And understandably so, for someone to say that. [We laugh]

K: So, slowly he said, he told me, "There is a difference between beautiful and pretty."

E: Do you want to elaborate more?

K: Pretty is to please other people. It is like if you poured water, it will flow away and disappear rather quickly. It's a very momentary thing for the eye. But beauty is from your personality--a personal expression. And you don't have to please other people. You own it. That's beauty. And at that moment, it clicked. I thought, "That's it! That's why I'm doing art."

E: I see.

K: And I said, "How do I do that?" And he said, "Take everything out from your handbag. Even though it's like you don't want to show it to anybody, you just take it all out. It's very personal things, like lipstick or tampon, I know you don't want everybody to see this, but take them out. And take them out, and draw them."

E: Throw it away? Or?

K: Draw a picture of it.

E: Oh, draw, I see. I'm sorry..

K: Paint [a picture] of it. Make art out of it. And he showed me a picture [by] Sutton, an Expressionist painter in Europe, and it was very ugly. I thought, "there are already so many ugly things in our lives. Why do we have to paint ugly fish--stinky fish--and sprinkle blood on it? Why do we have to do that?" So, he really held my hand, walked [me] one step at a time to help me to understand what's inside of me trying to come out and what [it is that] really stops me short.

E: I see.

K: So, I began to understand my personal burdens. Because of therapy! Actually, art-making became therapy for [sorting out my problems]. So, I went deeper and deeper and deeper. At last, I was convinced that art-making was one of the best ways to [learn] about myself.

E: O.K. So, that's why you do art?

K: Yes, for a long time that was why.

E: That's phenomenal.

K: It's, a therapeutic concept, sort of...

E: For you, personally, it was therapeutic, but then also you used it to show--

K: To show and communicate with other people.

E: Interesting.

K: I have this issue, and some people look at the artwork, and say, "Oh, yes, me, too!"

E: I see.

K: And sort of trying to find the string to make connections with other people.

E: Very interesting. O.K.

K: And that was pretty big for a while for me, and I found comfort, and also felt like I'm not alone.

E: Interesting.

K: Art is an arena in which to communicate with other people. The communication makes us vulnerable. For a time I felt like I had finally purged myself and no longer needed art as therapy. But now I find I am recovering another part of myself, and entering another chapter in my artmaking.

End.